

An Expatriate

By Jackson Hyland-Lipski

Chapter I

Fitzgerald once said “the best of America drifts to Paris. The American in Paris is the best American. It is more fun for an intelligent person to live in an intelligent country. France has the only two things toward which we drift as we grow older—intelligence and good manners.” Jonathan took this to be quite a pretentious quote, yet yearned for the feeling of being included in such a group. Approaching Paris from his taxi, he felt far from a best American - tired, anxious, disengaged, just as France felt far from an intelligent country from his limited view thus far. It was six in the morning Parisian time, but for Jonathan it was still about midnight in New York. It was hard for him to believe that he had gotten there. He had sat in his car with his parents to get to the airport, sat waiting at the gate, sat on the plane for six hours, and now sat in the back of a taxi halfway across the globe. The lack of energy it took Jonathan to achieve such distance created a separation from Paris, and rather created a sense within him that he was still very much at home. The fact that it was still dark out and that he was on a highway, which could be any highway, added to this effect of regularity, but he told himself, over and over, that he was very much in a new world.

At around six thirty in the morning, Jonathan arrived at the hotel an hour or so before the sun. Stepping out of the taxi, Jonathan was greeted by a man who he immediately assumed was homeless due to his baggy grey sweatpants, frayed cotton long-sleeve, thong'd sandals and socks, and his disheveled demeanor. After the man greeted him in a very sincere manner, gesturing at his bags, Jonathan understood that it was the concierge, who had probably just awoken, for although it was dark and in every way resembled the early stages of the night, the day on the verge of beginning. After paying the cab driver a preposterous amount of money, Jonathan followed the homeless man into his hotel, where he finally put down his bags, consisting of a backpack, suitcase, and huge duffel bag that was awkwardly weighted so that, although he could lift it, every few steps would nearly bring him tripping to the ground.

“Alors, vous avez une réservation avec nous, oui?” asked the concierge.

“Oui, c’est, umm....c’est Jonathan?” he attempted as a response.

“Euhh d’accord, et quelle est la première lettre de votre nom de famille ?”

“Osh” exclaimed Jonathan, impressed with himself for, firstly, mildly understanding the question, and secondly knowing how to pronounce the letter ‘h’ in French.

They went on with further questions for a few minutes, where he was flying in from, how many days he was staying, how he was paying, until the concierge explained that Jonathan’s room would not be ready until one or two in the afternoon, or as the man said, thirteen or fourteen. It was then approaching seven in the morning as a light trickle of rain could be heard on the cobblestone street from which he arrived.

Regardless of how little effort it took him to journey to this distant city, Jonathan felt the void between himself and his home.

As he walked outside, leaving his bags with the concierge, he could exhale the stress that had built up since the moment he applied to study abroad. He was there. The thought of having no home for the next seven hours, nowhere to sit that had the comfort of the familiar, to stop moving and reflect on the present and the actuality of being there, weighed on the front of his mind until his head was heavy enough to physically propel him forward until his hotel room was ready. Jonathan understood, although he disregarded it, that his sentiment of homelessness was rooted more deeply and abstractly than simply his necessary and temporary absence from the hotel. He was in a new place, forming a new mindset, and due to experience and total newness Jonathan was inevitably altering his entire identity. The first glimpses of daylight began to creep in through the alleys that winded beyond his view, and he felt the voyage end and his day begin.

Chapter II

He walked directionless for a while, disconnected from the people and streets that surrounded him, due to the still lingering darkness and the hood which he wore to shield himself from the misty rain that resembled snow from the way the wind attempted to prevent it from hitting the ground. A young woman, maybe 25, was opening up a café across the street from Jonathan while a Vespa quickly drove passed and streaked the silence of the morning, which together began to fill in the sensual landscape surrounding him. The warmth of the day began to caress his back as the sun rose over the horizon of the boulevard behind him as he walked toward the river Seine.

After passing by a few more cafés, he could not shake the thought of the expatriates of the twenties - Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Henry Miller, Gertrude Stein, sitting at these cafés and writing, feeling more at home here than in their homeland, Jonathan's homeland. They had felt like foreigners in the US - uncomfortable, unwanted, detached from their birth land - so they moved to Paris to live within the romantic setting they idealized and imagined in their works. To be reborn, in a sense. Jonathan was there for reasons that opposed those of these émigrés, yet he yearned for the same outcome of a grand awakening.

Unlike this Lost Generation, Jonathan felt very at home in the United States. His routine days had begun to melt together, and although he was usually very content with the habitual nature of his daily life, he craved for new experiences and a break from the usual. These thoughts sat at the back of his mind for the most part, his time mostly involving other people, roommates, friends, family. He did not have much time to himself, time to reflect, to escape the shallow plane on which he spent most of his time. However, the occasional breaks from monotony allowed Jonathan to imagine a reality in which these breaks took up the majority of his time, where he could devote sufficient periods to his self. After research, forms, time and mild

stress, the opportunity arose to study in Paris, to experience something newfangled. For unlike the expatriates whom he longed to recreate, who searched for a sense of home, Jonathan was escaping his home, his sheltered daily habitudes, for a sense of adventure and reformation. This brought him to Paris, to this boulevard that warmed his back in the direction from which he came, to the river Seine, to which he eagerly arrived after a wet and disorienting walk riddled with broken questions to strangers, who were more than happy to help a friendly foreigner.

Walking across a bridge lined with the sculpted faces of the men who knew this river before the bridges that majestically arched above existed, Jonathan watched the water beneath him swirling like marble, resembling the walkway upon which he stood. Before leaving for France, Jonathan downloaded the discography of Sam Cooke, and although it was not French music, he listened to it for the entirety of his journey thus far because it placed him in a time which he felt much more aesthetically connected to than the present. Music had a large affect on his mood, so he tried to keep his music consistent with the temperament he wished to resonate within him. Chasing the current with his eyes, it led him to Notre Dame, the towering cathedral situated upon an island in the Seine. After crossing the bridge he followed the current to Notre Dame, where he stopped and sat on a bench sprinkled with raindrops. He sat there for a few moments, his gaze switching between the cathedral and the varying tourists swarming around it. Here he could really sense the wide gap between the present and the vast history of the city. They did not blend together, but rather violently clashed in quite a beautiful yet disconcerting manor. Notre Dame stood to his left, emanating colors, patterns and styles which one would associate with belle Paris. To his right a plain and distracting set of bleachers, which, although not nearly as tall as Notre Dame, stained the surroundings with a sense of commercialism. While some tourists would go into the cathedral, others would run up this stadium seating and take picture after picture of the view. Jonathan found it interesting, this divide allowing him to feel immersed in both the modern and ancient cultures which this one square universally represented. He inhaled deeply and walked beneath the welcoming arch of the cathedral, where dozens of carved figures peered down at him. The church was overwhelming for Jonathan, who felt the vague nostalgia of being there before, ten years earlier. The classical music he chose to play for this event, Berlioz's 'Symphonie Fantastique' dramatically enhanced and darkened this building, which held so much history and meaning for so many people.

It was now fully daylight, and the dust of the church floated in the air, nearly frozen in time, from the rays which seeped in through the stained glass mandalas. There is no place in the world where so many people can stand, look, and wander in such complete silence that begins due to respect yet lingers from the awe it inspires. The smell of lit candles commemorating those who were lost always reminded Jonathan of his childhood, of his mother who would light candles in churches where they would travel in honor of her mother, his grandmother. Jonathan lit a candle, and would from then on, not for religious reasons, but rather to devote time to simply think about his parents, how they were, how far they were, yet how close they felt,

and times, vice-versa. He could have teared up right then, but everything was so new, and there was so much to take in, that these thoughts could not overcome his excitement. He could not help but smile, un-self-consciously, for the plethora of days that lay ahead for him before he left Paris a home and voyaged back to something that would be forever altered.